

COMBATANTS

Combatants (Nineteenth-Twenty-First Century)

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ABSTRACT

A combatant is someone who is given the right to fight. These actors of war can be regular or irregular, as the civilians who take up arms in cases of invasion—irregular soldiers and resistance members—had their right to armed force recognized: faced with the diversification of conflicts during the twentieth century, the law of war (*ius in bello*) accepted the legality of irregular troops. Combatants are consequently those who “wage war.” All wars—whether world wars, civil wars, wars of decolonization, or wars of coalition—ultimately come down to individuals killing or being killed, for human are the ones “who make up reality” in combat, as pointed out by the Second Empire Colonel Ardant du Picq, in the second half of the nineteenth century. Being a combatant thus involves confronting violence and fear, as well as sociability and time on leave. The related historiography initially focused on the conviction of engagement by exploring the issue of consent/constraint, and then turned to the daily and material life of soldiers.



Personal effects of combat medic Thibault Miloche, killed in Afghanistan in 2010.
Credits Philippe de Poulpique/Musée de l'armée.



Postcard from 1914 of the young Serbian soldier Dragoljub Jelicic. Source : [Wikimedia Commons](#)



Édouard Déaillé, Le Rêve (The Dream), 1888, Musée d'Orsay. Source : [Wikimedia Commons](#)



Men from the Transmissions Service of the Forces françaises libres during the Second World War. Credits Fondation Charles de Gaulle. Source : www.charles-de-gaulle.org

Combatant Identities

The notion of combatants is related to a collective identity that includes a plethora of categories based, among many other criteria, on age, rank (officers and non-commissioned officers from the ranks or a military academy), as well as the type of war being waged. It is also possible to distinguish between career soldiers and personnel recruited in times of war, including those conscripted for military service where this existed, along with enlistees and reservists. For example, the French Daguet division sent to Kuwait in 1991 recruited its 12,000 soldiers from the professional army. While regiments were still “reckoned” in terms of “bayonets” in 1914, differences between soldiers emerged as weapons became more diverse, especially with the rise of artillery and aviation. The two world wars also generated a distinction between direct combatants, which is to say those engaged in fire, who carry an individual or collective weapon (infantry, light or heavy artillery, engineers), and indirect combatants, who organize military logistics from the rear, and potentially engage in long-range fire. This distinction disappears in wars of insurrection, in which any soldiers can transform into a direct combatant.

The modern era also saw the recruiting of so-called “indigenous” populations within a colonial context. In France, the first battalion of Senegalese infantrymen was created by Governor Faidherbe in 1857, followed by other units that took part in conquering the Empire. In the wake of Lieutenant-Colonel Mangin’s 1910 defense of a “black force” to alleviate French military weaknesses, especially in terms of troops, the idea gradually took hold that colonies and their “warrior races” (to use Mangin’s terms) could take part in national defense, including within Europe. Indigenous military service was established in 1912 after voluntary enlistment proved disappointing, even when accompanied by coercive practices. Great Britain was not to be outdone, as four of the nine million soldiers mobilized during the First World War were from its empire. This participation ended in promises that were not kept by metropolises in terms of benefits, compensation to families in the event of death, tax exemptions, reserved public sector jobs, and an easing of the Code de l’Indigénat. For all that, the Forces françaises libres (FFL), which continued the struggle after General de Gaulle’s appeal, including from 1940 onward of a very large majority of indigenous contingents, with half of its troops in the fall of 1944 (250,000 men) being combatants from the Maghreb and Sub-Saharan Africa.

The feminization of the military began in the late nineteenth century with medical services and auxiliary posts, and ultimately spread to all units. Wrongly considered as an innovation of the last century, child soldiers appeared during the eighteenth century on the American continent, and later in Europe. Is Gavroche not one of the most famous ones, perched atop a barricade in Paris in June 1832? The First World War established the figure of the “child-hero,” such as the young Serb Momčilo Gavrić, who was the mythical “youngest soldier of the Great War” and who became a corporal at the age of 8. The ambiguous figure of the child soldier (hero or victim?) became a fixture in the martyrology with the *Hitlerjunge*, which was involved in the final fighting in Berlin, and was long presented as being incorporated by force. However, there were many factors that led to early enlistment, including coercion, the disorganization of society, and a fantasy vision of warlike assaults combining initiation rites and images of virility. Today historians speak more willingly of “teenaged combatants” (M. Pignot) to refer to the 250,000 to 300,000 girls and boys involved in civil and interstate wars, the majority of whom are in Africa.

While the enlistment of children under 18 years of age (15 until 2000) in armed operations, including non-combatant posts, is considered a war crime—as is the forced incorporation of nationals from the opposing side (expatriates, prisoners, civilians under occupation)—each state remains free to organize its military recruitment. In Europe, the dual nature of military recruitment—a professional army and the mobilization of civilians during emergencies—was the traditional configuration until the spread of the nation state diffused the citizen-soldier model during the nineteenth century. Napoleon proclaimed that “a nation defended by the people is invincible,” while “reactionary” regimes—with the notable exception of Russia, which kept the long-term military service introduced by Peter the Great—professed that only professional soldiers could win a war, and proved reluctant to arm the people. Non-universal conscription systems were established in Austria in 1808 and Prussia in 1812, while

the Bourbon Restoration recruited a professional army in France. The Third Republic reestablished universal conscription in stages, despite threats from President Thiers, who declared in 1872 that “military service would set fire to the minds and place a rifle on the shoulder of all socialists.” In 1914, most European countries opted for compulsory military service of approximately two years, with a notable exception: the United Kingdom maintained only a limited army of professionals in times of peace. After exhausting voluntary enlistments, it established conscription between 1916 and 1920, reestablished it in March 1939, and eliminated it once again in 1960. Both world wars were therefore waged by mass armies. During the postwar period, most states maintained military service (two years in the Soviet bloc, fifteen months in the FRG starting in 1954, one year in France until 1950 and eighteen months after joining the NATO Alliance), as the Cold War required preparation for the colossal struggle between the Warsaw Pact and The Atlantic Alliance. After 1992 it was more a matter of carrying out global policing operations, with military service gradually being abandoned; following Belgium (1995) France abandoned this republican tradition in 1997, but Germany did so only in 2010. Of all the countries that maintained military service (Greece, Estonia, and Austria), only Denmark opened it up to female citizens. However, in Eastern and Northern Europe, some states decided to restore conscription after the invasion of Crimea in 2014, including Lithuania and Sweden (for both women and men).

Fighting

The forms taken by combat have also experienced the acceleration of History since the nineteenth century. In both 1870 and under Napoleon, engagements pitted cavalry squadrons “boot against boot” and infantry formations along a front stretching 10-15 kms in length, and 500 meters to 1km in depth. In the following century, the range of increasingly effective artillery and discontinuous combat formations extended fire zones across the front line (80 km in the Meuse in May 1940), and hundreds of kilometers behind it as well. For that matter, with the generalization during the Great War of machine guns, grenades, and poison gas, the death that was both inflicted and suffered became largely anonymous and industrial. Close combat continued, but was only the final phase of engagement. In France, the Lebel rifles adopted in 1887 and still in use immediately after the First World War, included a bayonet. Today anonymity is pushed to the extreme with robotic combat, raising the ethical question of whether one can legally be killed by a robot.

The protective and support equipment that accompanied the transformations of increasingly deadly offensive weaponry also evolved: gas masks, steel and Kevlar helmets, outfits protecting against biological or chemical attacks, and exoskeletons that allow soldiers to march further and carry heavier loads. However, the equipment used for augmented soldiers is still fragile and complex, and cannot be used intensively. The combatant’s increasingly sophisticated environment has led to very human considerations, such as how to manipulate advanced technology, and how to assimilate an interactive flow of information in situations of intense stress. Above 120 beats per minute, human beings lose motor control accuracy, making it impracticable for soldiers to be distracted by the complexity of a tool. Technological progress has ultimately emphasized human vulnerability. Artisanal equipment nevertheless continues in parallel: in the twenty-first century, militias in the Balkans have produced tactical vests consisting primarily of salvaged Soviet parts (tent canvas, pant pockets, folded hats for rockets). The clothing worn by combatants has also adapted. For a long time, uniforms had to be as conspicuous as possible, as armies sought to impress the enemy from afar, and most importantly to remain visible for their fellow soldiers through the smoke generated by artillery. However, beginning in 1915-1916, camouflage became the primary objective given technical advances in weaponry. All armies subsequently opted for khaki, *feldgrau*, and horizon blue colors.

After the spiraling human losses of the twentieth century, the end of the Cold War led to the notion of “zero deaths.” Public opinion was no longer amenable to seeing soldiers return in coffins, especially as deployments now took place in distant theaters. Each year since 2004, France has paid national tribute on November 11 to the French soldiers who fell in the field, from the First World War to today’s OPEX (foreign operations), for instance the

90 deaths suffered by the La Fayette taskforce operating in Afghanistan from 2009 to 2012, including ten (from the 8th RPIMa) who fell during the Uzbun Valley ambush on August 18, 2008. In 2016 the ceremony was extended to include victims of terrorist attacks. The Unknown Soldier, which was inaugurated in 1920, has become the personification of all combatants, as in Prague where it embodies the fight “to defend traditional democratic values, [in the Czech Republic] as well as the world’s vulnerable areas.”

Medical advances sometimes prevented death at the front, for instance with eradication of the cholera and typhus epidemics that decimated troops in the Dardanelles in 1915. Similarly, throughout the twentieth century, the proportion of the deceased among those medically evacuated from the front fell steadily (16% in 1870, 1% in the 1960s). Wounds naturally evolved with the weaponry. During the artillery war that was the First World War, the new wounds caused by shrapnel, conical pivoting bullets, and flamethrowers required on-site disinfection and even treatment for wounds, or immediate evacuation. A medical chain was implemented based on a fairly identical model across all armies: stretcher, regimental station for first aid and stabilization, triage centers, and then hospitals at the rear. An average of 11-14% of the wounded were injured in the face. Called “broken faces” and sometimes “broken gargoyles” in England, “*Menschen ohne Gesicht*” in Germany, and “*gueules cassées*” in France, soldiers mutilated in the face had to fight to be recognized as disabled, except in the progressive Weimar Republic. Other categories of the wounded had their rights recognized (disability pension, equipment for mutilated individuals) in 1919 by almost all belligerent nations. The Second World War also produced new types of wounds due to aerial attacks with bombs and napalm. Aside from this, the range of wounds essentially remained identical, although they were exacerbated by the widespread use of mines and small-caliber assault rifles. The healing process was accompanied by a *Cellule de réadaptation et de réinsertion des blessés en opération* (C2RBO, The Rehabilitation and Reintegration War Wounded Cell) was created in France in 2011.

Violence also had effects on the psyche. It took a long time for neuropsychiatric symptoms to transition from the council of war (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder being seen as a refusal to fight) to medical services. Psychiatrists identified the impact of war trauma in the late nineteenth century. This avenue was first explored by soldiers hypnotized by the Frenchman Charcot in 1880. After 1902, this therapeutic method was used to treat British soldiers who suffered from crises of hysteria upon their return from the Boer Wars. The young neurologist disciples of Charcot who were mobilized at the front during the Great War observed that the infantrymen returning from the battle of Charleroi were in a state of confusion and stupor that the British called “shell-shock,” and the French “*obusite*.” Hypnosis was used to treat war neuroses from London to Saint Petersburg and Poznań. In Great Britain in 1939, 132,000 veterans received pensions for neuroses. Today armies continue to use these cathartic therapies in “decompression locks” that welcome combatants returning from OPEX.

Holding On

Ardant du Picq was the first to assess combatant morale, thereby becoming a pioneer of military sociology. He concluded from the answers to his questionnaire regarding battles such as Magenta and Solferino (1859) that fear played a central role in the violence of war; he subsequently placed humans and *esprit de corps* at the heart of battle.

The question of the will to fight has attracted a great deal of research since the late twentieth century. Historians have replaced the former debate between consent and coercion with a range of attitudes and opinions toward war, which tend toward support—more or less asserted, more or less conscious—and submission or even resignation, including in the face of social pressure. The degree of conviction is difficult to objectify, and can firstly be gauged implicitly during moments of quiet, as in the various episodes of fraternization, or during the mutinies observed on all fronts in 1917: in Italy, where people had as elsewhere counted on a short war (“a stroll up to Vienna”), the “Cardona strategy” of repeated and pointless assaults sparked refusals and even desertion. Orders for mobilization also offer a good vantage point: the scarcity of incidents in Austria-Hungary in 1914 was a sign of the loyalty that

the various nationalities had toward Emperor Franz Joseph; the rate of desertion approaching 50% in Serbia in the fall of 1911 signaled the population's weariness toward the intensification of fighting in Croatia. On the opposite end of the spectrum, demonstrations of enthusiasm for war are often tempered by historians, who emphasize the effect of emulation and bravado prompted by collective separations. This was the case in August 1914 with the image of soldiers departing with a "flower in the rifle," a reflection of the theatrics of the moment, which were fostered by photography. However, beyond the moment of mobilization, determining how combatants *held on* for over four years without a real movement of mass mutiny—aside from the particular case of the Russian front—necessarily entails a genuine conviction, shared by all belligerents, that it was a just fight. Finally, researchers have emphasized a sociological bias, in which elites showed greater support for fighting than the peasantry in France, Germany, Italy, and Russia.

However in 1939, approximately twenty years after the hell of the "Albanian Golgotha" (1915), Verdun (1916), and Isonzo (1915-1917), "fresh and joyful" propaganda regarding war was no longer possible. Maintaining the will to fight was approached in other terms: the physical and moral resistance of the Wehrmacht's combatants brought the notion of moral strength into play; the army that emerged from Nazi totalitarianism was effectively driven by a motivation that helps understand long-term acceptance of horrendous conditions, for instance the Russian winter. Religion also contributed to troop morale, with offices being held at the front. Faith could accompany and even fuse with the zeal to fight, leading to a metareligious patriotism in the tradition of the "*Gott mit uns!*" proclaimed by William I at the outbreak of the Austro-Prussian War in 1866. Similarly, individual religiosity was expressed through the possession of sacred books or pious objects. In France, worship of the Virgin Mary became widespread at the front during the First World War, whereas it had been mostly reserved for the feminine sphere until the late nineteenth century. Clarity surrounding the rules of engagement also help preserve the morale of troops, who firmly believe they are fighting a war that respects codes of honor. This helps explain why the dagger—a "bandit's weapon"—received such a poor reception among the French ranks in the early twentieth century. Combatants also need a clear objective (desired end effect) and the means to achieve it: the Blue Helmets posted at the intersections of Sarajevo in the 1990s, who were equipped with weapons they were forbidden from using, have testified to their great sense of disarray.

Finally, physical and moral strength depend on access to leave, which is to say time spent away fighting, fatigue duty, patrol, or training. Rest was essential, and science soon sought to mitigate the lack of sleep at the front and to increase soldiers' vigilance with different substances: cocaine during the First World War, methamphetamines during the Second World War, modafinil during the 1991 Gulf War, and quite simply with extended-release caffeine. Today's campaigns include short phases of intense engagement and long phases of movement, preparation, and waiting; leisure activities include the perennial card game (sometimes with images of wanted war leaders in order to memorize their features), video games, and sports. Like cards, tobacco is shared by all military cultures, serving as both a social act and an anti-depressant. During the second half of the twentieth century, army kits in the West sometimes also included condoms and a prophylactic kit to treat venereal diseases. Considered as central for both morale and discipline, the sexual life of combatants has generally involved recourse to prostitution. One of the distinctive features of French military society were the "*bordels militaires de campagne*" (BMC, Military Brothels), which emerged at the end of the First World War and definitively closed only in 1978. These structures located at the rear were meant to ensure both security—they reduced the movement of soldiers—and hygiene. They were less effective on the latter count, as one in five soldiers from the United Kingdom and Dominions—who frequented BMCs—admitted to French hospitals in 1916 suffered from venereal disease. During the Second World War, these "*maisons de tolérance*" (legal brothels) also functioned for American soldiers. As in the preceding conflict, the idea persisted that one of the objectives of BMCs was to prevent indigenous troops from "frequenting" "French women"—and even raping them—with women being specially recruited for them in North Africa. For that matter, in all of Europe under Nazi occupation, hundreds of "military brothels" were opened for the SS and the Wehrmacht, and partially populated with women taken in raids, especially in Central and Eastern Europe.

What was referred to as “trench art” endured in all wars involving a certain amount of immobility, up through the siege of Sarajevo. This search for recreational activities also involved writing, whether in the form of a diary or correspondence, which could be complemented with amateur photography. While the writing of combatants chiefly involved the world of intimacy, after publication it could serve as a record of their everyday lives, from the material conditions of their environment to their psyche. Correspondence is one of the most important instruments for maintaining troop morale, hence the central role of the postal service in the deployment of forces: during the first Gulf War, 3-4 million letters were delivered each day.

A combatant’s time began with the mobilization order, followed by the concentration of troops and transportation toward borders or combat zones. At the front they could be excluded from fighting due to captivity, as only legal combatants had the right to be considered prisoners of war. Until the nineteenth century, the fate of prisoners was entirely in the hands of the enemy, and a series of protective arrangements (Geneva 1864, The Hague 1899 and 1907, Geneva 1929) established a humanitarian framework for decent detention, albeit one that was rarely applied. Liberation did not automatically follow armistice in all cases. In May 1945, after Germany’s surrender, the entire Wehrmacht became a prisoner of war, with its 8 million men being freed in groups until 1954. There were 700,000 German prisoners in France who contributed to the country’s reconstruction, and whom the government was tasked with denazifying in accordance with the Potsdam Agreement. A combatant’s time finally ended with demobilization, although the process could be extremely slow: at the end of the First World War, the last soldiers from Czechoslovak legions did not return from the Russian front until November 1920. After demobilization, a new stage sometimes began with veterans associations, which could include a significant portion of society, as in the case of twentieth-century Bosnia where two-thirds of adult men fought.

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